The Marriage Commitment—Reply to Landau

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The Bachelor's Argument against marriage, as I described it in this journal,[1] says that marriage involves taking an imprudent risk of finding oneself committed to a relationship with someone one does not love. The evidence indicates that many people who marry eventually find themselves without the feelings for the other person which made a marital relationship seem worthwhile in the first place; and were that to happen to us, it would seem highly undesirable nonetheless to be locked into a relationship with our spouse as a result of the commitment we made when we married. I went on to argue that several obvious responses to this argument fail. In particular, if we enter into marriage without genuinely intending to keep our promise of maintaining a relationship with our spouse, we will be making an insincere promise. Alternatively, if our promise is sincere, but the morality of promise-keeping is such that when our feelings for the other person fade away the moral force of our commitment is cancelled, then the commitment itself seems otiose.

However, I did not consider all of the possible responses to the argument, and Iddo Landau has recently made an interesting suggestion about how to interpret the marriage commitment in a way that does not render it immoral or pointless.[2] His proposal is that what we are committing ourselves to when we marry is 'to invest work in performing certain acts that are likely to sustain the love' that underlies our wish to be in the relationship (476). On this view, marriage involves trying to cause ourselves to continue having the emotions that make the relationship worthwhile, and conversely trying to avoid things which would diminish or counteract those emotions. Although our feelings may not be under our direct control, as Landau points out, 'there are many acts that indirectly, and with sufficient degree of success, do help to strengthen or weaken, maintain or destroy, love' (476). If, for instance, I start seeing a lot of someone else whom I am slightly attracted to, I may find my interest in my wife beginning to wane. I may be unable to arrest the

[1] 'An Argument against Marriage,' *Philosophy* 78 (2003), 79–91.

[2] 'An Argument for Marriage,' *Philosophy* 79 (2004), 475–81.

doi:10.1017/S0031819105000288 ©2005 The Royal Institute of Philosophy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000288 Published online by Cambridge University Press

decline in my interest through a direct choice, but by spending more time with my wife and avoiding the other person I could probably achieve the same result. By making certain choices about how we interact with our spouse and others we may be able to exercise considerable influence on how we feel about him or her (476–77). It is these choices that the marriage commitment is supposed to control, Landau suggests.

In response to Landau's proposal, I wish to make three points in reverse order of interest. First, it is worth noting that the proposal is probably not a very good interpretation of what most people who marry take themselves to be doing, as Landau seems to agree (479). Most people seem to feel that marriage involves some sort of permanent commitment, vaguely expressed in the text of most marriage vows. What exactly that commitment is may not be obvious to most people; probably it is only incompletely and imperfectly expressed in what is uttered at the altar. But most people do seem to think that the commitment involves looking ahead to an entire life lived together, and not merely with the hope that they happen to have the good fortune that their love-sustaining acts really do succeed in sustaining love. There seems to be the sense, rather, that marriage has, or ought to have, some sort of *permanent binding force*, which is not the case under Landau's suggestion. If this is correct, then Landau has not managed (and probably has not tried) to defend marriage as conceived of by most people. Even if the Bachelor's Argument showed only that marriage as most people who are not philosophers conceive of it cannot be adequately defended, that would still be an interesting result.

However, Landau might reasonably claim that his goal is not to defend marriage as traditionally conceived, but rather to present a slightly revisionary version of the practice that is defensible and which is close enough to traditional marriage to deserve to be seen as a defence of the institution. Here we might entertain doubts about whether the version of marriage that Landau defends really is close enough to traditional conception to amount to a defence of *marriage*. Consider two couples, one of which marries in the usual way, and the other of which merely exchanges asseverations of love along with promises to work hard at sustaining those feelings. Have these two couples done roughly the same thing? Perhaps it is not clear that the second couple has done something reasonably close to marrying—after all, casual couples make *that* sort of commitment all the time without anyone thinking them to have done anything as momentous as marry. Of course, our intuitions may be swayed by the context in which the relevant promises are made. If we envision

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Landau's commitment being made in the presence of family and community, before an altar, addressed to a community leader, and so on, then it seems easier to believe that something like marriage has occurred. Then again, since the content of Landau's commitment is so much weaker than the traditional commitment, it may not be unfair to envision its being made in more of an offhand way. Why shouldn't a couple that has been casually dating for a few weeks get married on this proposal? All that they would be committing themselves to is trying to make the relationship work. But the question of whether the practice that Landau defends amounts to a defence of marriage or a defence of some rather different practice does not ultimately strike me as the crucial one, and so I set it aside and move on to my second point.

On this proposal, whether marriage is worthwhile or not entirely depends on how efficacious promises to perform love-sustaining acts are. For if it turns out that they are not especially conducive to maintaining a loving relationship, then marriage would, once again, appear to be pointless. An oddity of this view, then, is that it seems to make the significance of marriage depend entirely on certain facts about how good human beings are at maintaining loving relationships. It seems quite possible that scientific investigation would reveal that couples that do and that do not undertake to perform love-sustaining acts fare equally well in their relationships, and if that were so, then this conception of marriage would turn out to be a dead-end. (The fact that the significance of marriage seems to be contingent in this way is another reason to suspect it would not be a very plausible interpretation of what most people think marriage is; presumably most married couples do not take the significance of their marital status to depend on the investigations of scientists.) And there do seem to be substantial grounds for pessimism about the prospects for doing much to ensure that one's feelings for the other person persist. Consider how often relationships fail not because of changes in the people (over which they might exercise some control) but because constant exposure to one another for long periods of time simply brings out latent differences. People slowly grow apart in innumerable subtle and less subtle ways, and it is not obvious that this could be prevented or even substantially impeded with sufficient application and industry. My wife may undergo an alienating change in her religious beliefs, I may become a jaded cynic whom my wife cannot respect, or having children may bring about additions and subtractions in both our personalities; surely these kinds of changes are beyond our control and are likely causes of the fading of our feeling for one another.

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Nonetheless, this is merely armchair-pessimism, and it must be conceded that the issue is ultimately an empirical one which only scientists can settle for us. And Landau could substantially bolster his case by emphasizing that what is at stake is merely raising the probability of, rather than guaranteeing, the persistence of the feelings that are relevant to marriage. Perhaps marriage makes sense even if committing to doing everything we can to perpetuate our feelings for one another only makes a comparatively minor difference. Still, we may be uneasy with the thought that the significance of our marriage could in principle be cancelled at any moment by scientific research.

The third issue I want to raise goes to the core of the proposal we are considering. Let us grant that we can substantially increase the chances our feelings persisting by performing the kinds of actions Landau refers to. We must then confront the interesting question of why, granting that we could ensure the persistence of our love for the other person, we would want to. (To avoid important but extraneous considerations, assume that children and other special factors are not involved.) The answer seems obvious at first: our relationship with the other person is something good, and the persistence of our love is necessary to continue possessing that good. But we must be careful here. The proposal makes it sound as if we wanted to have feelings for the other person in order to have a relationship with him. But this gets things backwards: we want to have a relationship with the other person because of what we feel for him; we don't want to have certain feelings for him just in order to be able to have a relationship with him. The reason we 'work' at our relationships (by practising forbearance, making compromises, and so on) is that we already feel something for the other person and want to make sure that nothing gets in the way of having the sort of relationship those feelings render desirable. We do not work at a relationship in order to promote the kinds of feelings which enable us to sustain the relationship. For what could make the relationship itself desirable independently of those feelings? If the answer is that a long-lasting relationship offers certain benefits—e.g. the trust and security which only come with a lifetime of shared experiences and mutual dependence—it still seems strange to see marriage as an attempt to obtain those benefits by exercising indirect control over one's attitudes toward the other person. This seems to place mutual advantage at the heart of a relationship that ought to revolve around mutual love.

Perhaps there are other reasons for wanting to sustain mutual affection besides wanting to perpetuate the relationship. It may be

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that the very prospect of a change in one's feelings for the other person is itself alarming. Proust refers to something like this:

> Our dread of a future in which we must forego the sight of faces and the sound of voices which we love and from which today we derive our dearest joy, this dread, far from being dissipated, is intensified, if to the pain of such a privation we feel that there will be added what seems to us now in anticipation more painful still: not to feel it as a pain at all—to remain indifferent; for then our old self would have changed, it would then be not merely the charm of our family, our mistress, our friends that had ceased to environ us, but our affection for them would have been so completely eradicated from our hearts, of which today it is so conspicuous an element, that we should be able to enjoy a life apart from them, the very thought of which today makes us recoil in horror; so that it would be in a real sense the death of the self, a death followed, it is true, by resurrection, but in a different self, to the love of which the elements of the old self that are condemned to die cannot bring themselves to aspire.

Perhaps the goal of marriage is not to sustain the feelings for the sake of the relationship, but simply to sustain the feelings themselves (the relationship would be a byproduct, as it were). This, too, seems a little mysterious, however. It is not clear why it should be important to me that my love persist, setting aside the benefits considered above. Although Proust may be right that we sometimes fear losing our affection more than losing the relationship, his diagnosis concerning 'the death of the self' seems somewhat forced and fanciful. We may have reason to avoid certain types of profound changes to the kinds of people we are—changes in our religious orientation or our deepest ethical and political commitments are candidates—but surely the degree of our affection for someone we now love does not rise to that level. We may indeed 'recoil in horror' at the thought of becoming an idolater worshipping false gods or a sadistic paedophile, but Proust seems to exaggerate our reaction to the prospect of losing interest in our beloved. What, then, is intrinsically valuable about the mere persistence of my love for the other person? I am uncertain how to answer this question, although I do not deny that 'Nothing' would seem unsatisfying.

Landau's proposal for making sense of marriage is an interesting and important one, and I don't claim to have settled anything here. Although friendship has been fairly widely discussed among philosophers, marriage has not, despite its obvious importance. (If Aristotle had made some remarks about marriage instead of

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friendship would things have been the other way around?) Further discussion of the issues I have raised and others besides may resolve the dispute.

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